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# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VICTORY

BY ROLAND G. USHER

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THE moment victory became a fact, the fact of victory ceased to be in itself either significant or interesting. Indeed, once the outburst of thanksgiving and elation had spent itself, victory as such sank into the background and the public mind turned instinctively to the astoundingly difficult and dangerous problems of peace and reconstruction. On both, victory could not fail to have a direct influence. The immediate results of the war, so far as both were concerned, took their character from the moment at which victory came and the precise nature of the situation from which it proceeded. For the future student, the eventuality itself, once assured, possessed literally no significance compared to the fact that it came at a definite moment and in precisely such and such a way.

For the United States, indeed, the moment was the all important fact, for it defined the character of victory. That established its immediate significance, which in turn determined our international position for the present and perhaps for a generation, if not for a century. That the war was won was the great fact of significance to us who are now alive; that it was won this year and not next or five years hence; that it was won on French and not on German soil; that it was won without a victorious march across Germany to Berlin; these will be the facts of vital importance to our children and grandchildren.

The significance of victory was determined in the first place by the reasons for German collapse, by the facts it revealed about the attitude of the German people toward their own Government, and about the internal condition of Germany. It had been clear from the first that seventy millions of people could not by any sort of military victory be literally annihilated or crushed, could not by any army of occupation be coerced and policed, if they remained strong

and unrepentant. The attitude of the German people toward their own Government, toward the war, toward victory or defeat, toward the future, had been hidden by clouds of propaganda and deceit which only the end of the war could dispel. From a military victory, the result of the superior numbers of Germany's enemies, one sort of a peace and one kind of a settlement became inevitable. Drastic territorial guarantees would be essential to assure even a moderate measure of relative security for France and Belgium and the continuation of armament, fleets and debts for the future. Such a victory signified a foe beaten but strong, crushed but united, defiant, arrogant, unrepentant because still able to resist. It meant victory with qualifications, victory with conditions, safety without security, and peace impermanent and unstable. But if the victory should be due not merely to a military defeat but to a military collapse, itself produced by an economic collapse, by a political revolution, or by the loss of morale in army or people or both, it would have an utterly different significance for the future and provide for both peace and reconstruction premises of the utmost consequence.

Victory was in truth the result of a defeat in the field simultaneous with economic exhaustion, loss of morale, and the first throes of political revolution. It was victory with the foe surrendering in regiments and battalions; with the Reichstag clamoring for the Kaiser's abdication; victory with a republic proclaimed in Munich, with the fleet mutinous, with the "glorious allies" ingloriously deserting, with the Kaiser and Crown Prince in flight. There were those—indeed there are still those—who vividly regretted that Marshal Foch should not have dictated the terms of armistice on German soil, that the Allied army should have had no chance to give the Germans a little taste of their own medicine. But the significance of victory is greater, the outlook for the future brighter because the end of the war did not witness a defeated people doggedly selling their lives on the banks of the Rhine in a vain effort to save the Fatherland. Unconditional surrender in Berlin would have been vastly different from unconditional surrender with the Allies still a measurable distance from the German frontier and far from the final line of German defense, the Rhine. It stood for a lack of national cohesion, for a lack of national faith in their own cause, in their own strength and resources. It stood for a

national unwillingness to die for the cause which is all but the most significant fact possible for the future. It proved the aggression of the war: when the moment for self-defense came, they threw up their hands and cried, "Kamerad." If the war had been begun in literal self-defense, there would have been at its end no weakening but rather a stiffening of morale as the enemy approached the frontier. The Government and not the people cried, "Kamerad." The officers, snugly ensconced in luxurious parlors around mahogany tables, and not ragged men in trenches nor starving peasants in the fields, cried "Kamerad." There they convicted themselves of the true meaning of the war and gave real significance to victory. Yellow will out: the stain of aggression is uneffaceable.

They did more, they gave us the first unmistakable clue to the real attitude toward the war of the masses in Germany, the first irrefutable evidence that the German people have been more sinned against than sinning. The leaders knew the hearts of the nation were not in the war; that the nation had not willed it; that its confidence had never been theirs in the highest sense. They counseled no desperate defense; they made no attempt to rally back to back; they proclaimed no resistance till death as preferable to slavery for free men. They did not deem the German people capable of any such magnificent response as the French made in 1870, with their army crushed, the emperor imprisoned, the state itself overthrown, and Paris surrounded. Was there then talk of surrender with or without conditions? Armies arose from the soil over night like the crop from the sowing of the dragon's teeth. A government was extemporized; generals appeared as if by magic; national leaders were found and followed. Bismarck grew day by day to wonder whether victory was possible even after the war had been won.

Nor did the German leaders believe possible any such stubborn resistance as the Belgian nation had displayed, silent, contemptuous, unconquerable, even though crushed beneath the heel of a foreign army and incapable of the least physical resistance with a breath of hope for success. But who in Belgium spoke of capitulation, who talked of defeat, who gave up hope? Even Serbia, crushed by overwhelming odds, decimated by disease, its territory occupied by the invader, fought on. And Italy! Trembling on the verge of collapse, its armies in rout from the most dire catas-

trophe suffered by Allied arms, Italy rose as one man and held the invaders in a military position which their own military authorities believed could not be maintained. But the Germans were different and they knew it. Their leaders were different and they knew it. Their cause was different and the leaders knew that their own people knew it. So they surrendered! There is the crowning significance of victory: the confession of the German leaders that the nation was not and never had been behind them; that it had not and never did have heart for their magnificent schemes of world dominion; that the Germany of Luther, of Beethoven, of Goethe, was not dead but drugged into insensibility. There is another Germany than that of 1914, and they knew themselves incapable of winning its confidence.

## II

The significance of victory was determined by the price paid for it. Here lay its importance for the issue of reconstruction: it did not cost the Allies more in men and in resources than they could afford to pay. Their limit was dangerously near. France, Canada, and England in particular lost full as many men, dead and crippled, as they could spare without sacrificing the physical strength of the nation needed to maintain its economic prosperity in the future. But the limit was not reached, certainly not passed, and more was not paid than so sweeping a victory was worth. Victory came in time. There is another significant fact. From the first it was clear that its eventual meaning would lie in the relative price paid by Germany and by the Allies. If the condition of Germany after defeat was not worse than that of the Allies after victory, the war would have been fought in vain; the price would have been too high. But the condition of Germany is beyond measure worse than that of any Allied country, worse perhaps than her greatest enemies have wished for her. The loss of men, the wastage of material has been extreme. Financially the war could not have been handled worse: Germany is bankrupt.

There was, too, a serious danger that the expulsion of the Germans from France and Belgium might unavoidably result in laying waste the entire country and destroy throughout that broad and rich area the permanent gains of civilization for a thousand years, as it had in the districts over which the conflict had previously raged. Victory won at such cost

would clearly have complicated beyond measure the economic and physical recovery of France and would have imposed heavier burdens upon the material resources of the Allies. The war was won before the submarine was able to destroy Allied shipping beyond the point which could be promptly replaced. There were many days when it seemed hardly possible that the success which the Germans promised their people from unrestrained submarine warfare should not reward their perfidy. The war was won before the resources of raw materials and of live stock had been depleted beyond the possibility of immediate repair. True, for two years the Allied countries have been in sorer straits by far than has been revealed. France and Italy in particular have known a destitution greater than perhaps for a century, and even England, its soil untouched by war, knew a degree of privation which intelligent observers had supposed, previous to 1914, would never be possible again.

The difficulty, however, was superficial rather than fundamental, the result of an insufficient number of ships to tap the great supplies in Australia and South America. The submarine did successfully circumscribe the economic area on which the Allies could rely, compelled them to fight the war on the basis of what existed or could be produced in Europe and in North America. In both, the reserve supplies of food and raw materials of all sorts were soon entirely exhausted, and only the intelligent increase of production prevented calamity. But the world's reserve supplies of wool, wheat, hides, nitrates, and metals are not depleted. South America, Australia, and the Orient have accumulated vast amounts which will be available as soon as the necessary shipping can be diverted, and will promptly, with a continuation of the increased production in Europe and North America consequent upon the cessation of hostilities, make good the deficiencies of the Allied nations and still enable us to succor with caution Eastern Europe. Another year of war would have meant extreme suffering in Europe, privation here, and the exploitation of the economic resources of England and the United States beyond the point of safety for the future.

### III

Victory emphasized the glorious unselfishness of the part which America has played in the war and will, unless we ourselves destroy it, make permanent the European impression

of our disinterested conduct. There could be for the future relations of the United States with the rest of the world no more unassailable cornerstone than this. There were from the first those who maintained that from the selfish point of view, the United States had everything to gain from the maintenance of an imperceptibly delicate balance of power in Europe. So long as Great Britain, France, and Italy had Germany to fear, so long might the United States hope to hold the balance herself, with all of those attendant material gains in non-European sections of the globe which the old diplomacy had taught would follow from that sort of position. *Per contra*, from the clear preponderance in Europe of any coalition, the United States had everything to lose. Obviously, it was much to our interest to prevent the victory of Germany. That would have been indeed fatal. But, argued from the old diplomatic point of view, there was much to be said for the contention that it was equally our interest to prevent a sweeping victory for the Allies, certainly to prevent too sweeping a victory. For, once Germany was really crushed, the balance of power in Europe would incline toward the Allies and the United States would lose the advantageous position due to the necessity of calling upon her physical strength to redress the balance disturbed by the physical preponderance of the Central Empires.

Not a few of the old school diplomats in Europe and America thus interpreted President Wilson's ideas of a league of nations and his talk of peace without victory. They put their tongues in their cheeks at the mention of the idealistic aims of such diplomacy. It was two for ourselves and one for Germany and the league of nations. Once Germany was beaten, they said, the league would be needless to fetter her, but exceedingly useful to enable the United States to interfere in European policies and to control the Allies themselves. Only by the creation of such a league, indeed, pointed out the diplomats, could the United States by any possibility expect to exert an influence upon European issues. Our concern for the restraint of Germany, for internationalism, for idealism, was thus a neat and effective camouflage for the advancement of our own self-interest. We proposed to prevent the Allies from beating Germany too badly. We proposed if possible, once the victory was won, to prevent the Allies from utilizing it except by our consent and permission.

But the old school diplomats were confounded by the

consent of the United States to a sweeping victory, by the heartiness with which we threw into the breach an extended effort, which not only was certain eventually to achieve a sweeping victory, but which could have had no other purpose. The United States entered the war for reasons the most nearly disinterested and impersonal which any great nation ever possessed for an act of such magnitude. We have ended the war upon a similarly high plane. Judged by any standards except those of idealism and disinterestedness, we have contributed to a sort of victory which can only result in detriment to our own position. We have won the war and hurt ourselves. We have lost what some supposed we fought for—the physical possibility of interference in European politics. Yet unquestionably the moral gain must outweigh a thousand-fold any conceivable influence the United States could have exerted as the result of its physical size. Separated as we are from Europe by three thousand miles of ocean, we should never be able to exert physical influence upon European affairs which could not be justly interpreted as aggressive and offensive. Our true influence must be moral, and the true greatness of the United States in the future will come from the fact that our situation enables us to espouse the idealistic even at the cost of our material interest.

We have thus once and for all laid low the suspicions industriously sowed by the Germans, that America would join the war in order to become herself ruler of the world, that the Allies would lose the war thrice over should they depend upon American assistance. The aegis of empire would rest then in the hands of a nation whose physical size and physical position made her unassailable from Europe. The moral splendor of the position of the United States at the moment of victory is for the American people the fact of greatest significance.

#### IV

It is therefore imperative that we, as a people, should remember the clearest, most obvious, most salient, most fundamental fact about the victory: the United States did not win it. It was won by the French, the British, and the Italians with American assistance. By this cardinal fact international relationships will be conditioned when the new settlement is made. Herein lies the significance of the moment



of victory. Had the war lasted another year the American army would have itself formed the major part of the victorious army. These are well known facts, but just at this moment they cannot be too often emphasized.

The danger is still great, and grows perhaps greater as time elapses, that a natural and pardonable pride in the prowess of our men will unintentionally exaggerate the part we played in the war and thus injure the reputation for magnanimity and unselfish action which the American nation to-day enjoys abroad to an extent equaled by no nation in history. What we did was so great and so significant that it is easily overstated, but *noblesse oblige* forbids. The French, British, and Italians ransomed their own soil, not we. We lent economic support without which surely the war could not have been continued. We brought at the darkest moment an indispensable moral support without which it is possible the gallant French and the stubborn British might have faltered. But these were indirect factors in victory; and so of our army. The mere presence of our men in France, even though not ready to enter the battle, made possible the use of the trained French and British armies for the great offensive which ended the war. We became the Allied reserve army, and the presence of so many Yanks in France and the knowledge that more Yanks were coming was a decisive though indirect factor in victory. Our share was great, indispensable, significant, but it was a share only.

## V

The fact that victory was won by the Allies and not by the United States possessed promptly definite significance for the negotiations of peace. There were an infinitude of specific and detailed arrangements to be made in Europe proper regarding internal and territorial questions which were not and could not be as vitally significant for the United States as for the European nations. Indirectly we are unquestionably interested in their solution; directly they do not concern us. Our Allies will now expect that same generosity and disinterest on our part in the negotiation of peace which we have displayed in the war. They will expect us, and rightly, to acquiesce in their decisions regarding European arrangements which primarily concern them. If the United States sits mute at the Congress, declines to accede to the decisions which they agree are expedient, they will feel a

just cause of umbrage. Primary decisions of essentially European questions the United States will not be expected to influence. We were not and are not now in a position to dictate the boundaries of Alsace-Lorraine, of Poland, or of the Balkans. Our disinterested record, the splendor of our moral position will lend a peculiar weight to such counsel, advice, or warning as our accredited representatives may address to the European statesmen, but the character of victory is such as to foreclose dictation by the United States at the peace conference on European or internal issues. Nevertheless, on all international questions involving nations outside Europe or issues not directly European, or even European issues which might indirectly concern nations outside Europe, the direct and active participation of the United States is certain, and it may be that we shall hold the casting vote. So much the degree of our participation would seem to assure.

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